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Mother Joan and Her Discontents

David Sorfa

I wanted to make a film about human nature and its innate reaction against repression and laws which are imposed on it. (Jerzy Kawalerowicz)

Mother Joan of the Angels (*Matka Joanna od Aniołów*, 1960) tells the story of the burgeoning love between a nun ostensibly possessed by a variety of demons and the exorcist, the last of many, who has come to deliver her from her torments. It is possible to read the hunch-backed nun Joan's possession as a misunderstood insanity, as a reaction to the horrors of the plague, as a passion for fame and excitement, as a possibly unconscious rebellion against her relegation to obscurity because of her looks and sex, as the hysterical expression of repressed desire or, perhaps most unlikely, as the tale of a woman possessed by the devil. One priest has already been burned to death, condemned by both the state and the church. This new one comes to understand himself through the prism of desire. The new priest, Suryn (played by Mieczysław Voit), arrives at the inn at the foot of the hill on which the convent perches and we are introduced to the crude villagers who drink and carouse as well as the tourist squire Wincenty Wołodkowicz (Zygmunt Zintel) who will later seduce the one nun, Sister Małgorzata (Anna Ciepielewska), who is able to travel from the convent to the inn and back again.

The Critics and Mother Joan

When it was screened in London in 1961, the only contemporary British review of Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Mother of Joan of the Angels* (in a 1962 edition of *Monthly Film Bulletin*) lamented its restraint and thought that the film missed the exciting core of the Loudun possession story. The reviewer writes that the film is "is rather like walking into a cool, brilliant, ultra-modern church and feeling a kind of hidden shame at discovering that the expected sensations of sanctuary fail to take hold". There is evidently a "disturbing coolness" to the film which "detracts from the viewers' involvement in its debate" (1962, p. 48). *Variety* on the other hand thought that *Mother Joan* might just stimulate too much debate as interpretations could differ and that there "could be Catholic objections" (Mosk, 1961). Critics in Poland itself saw the film as a "drama of rebellion against dogma" (Michalek & Turaj, 1988, p. 104) in both a political and religious sense. The Polish Catholic church at the

time, according to Kawalerowicz, declared watching *Mother Joan* a mortal sin but that the film is now seen more benignly by the church (Privett, 2001). The film virtually disappeared until its release on DVD in the UK in 2005 and while it will probably always be overshadowed by Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), it is undoubtedly an extremely important film both stylistically and politically.

Jerzy Kawalerowicz's films regularly use historical and contemporary events as allegories of repression and redemption. Kawalerowicz was born in the town of Gwoździec in Ukraine in 1922 and as a graduate of the Kraców Film Institute, the precursor of the more well known film school in Łódź, became head of the Kadr film production unit in 1955 (Haltorf, 2002, p. 77; Taylor et al., 2000, p. 124). He died in 2007. The period between 1954 and 1963 saw the emergence of the Polish School of filmmakers which was "characterised by romantic pessimism, a preoccupation with the subjection of the individual to the forces of history, and a re-examination of Poland's tragic war years" (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 186). Ewa Mazierska has called this period the "decade of love" and that that *Mother Joan* portrays a "romantic fever" which "cannot be suppressed by any ideology or social rules" (2010, p. 152). Kawalerowicz's films of this period, especially *Pociąg / Night Train* (1959) and *Mother Joan of the Angels*, particularly focus on the way in which individual desires are repressed or constrained by broader political and ideological issues. Mazierska, again, observes that religion is "the chief obstacle for experiencing love and acquiring individuality, but it can be regarded as a metonymy of any totalitarian ideology, including the communist one" (2010, p. 152).

However this criticism in both films is refracted through a more or less sympathetic presentation of the sincerity of religious belief, particularly Catholicism, and this is a theme to which Kawalerowicz returns in his final film *Quo Vadis* (2001). Here a Roman nobleman falls in love with a Christian slave and finds redemption and a broader purpose through this individual love. In a rather overblown coda, the film ends with the Apostle Paul having a time-lapse vision and deciding to return to Rome rather than flee persecution. The final shot sees Paul walking down into modern day Rome complete with motorised traffic. Kawalerowicz does not shy away from symbols and, at their best, his films are rather more subtle than this. What is however clear from this example - and also the ending of *Austeria / The Inn* (1983) in which a bloodied river on the first day of World War I foreshadows the holocaust (see Haltorf, 2012, pp. 141-143 and Brooke (2011)) - is that Kawalerowicz is

interested in the present as it is reflected in the historical past as well as the roots of the future in the present moment. Thus for Kawalerowicz *Mother Joanna* is very much a film about the Poland of the 1960s as much as it is a historical film or one that reflects perennial issues.

A History of the History

The possession has no “true” historical explanation, since it is never possible to know who is “possessed” and by whom. The problem stems precisely from the fact that possession, or “alienation” as we would say, *is*, but *indeterminately*, and that the attempt to free oneself from it consists in transposing it, repressing it, or transferring it elsewhere: from a collectivity to an individual, from the Devil to reasons of State, from the demonic to devotion. The process of this necessary labor is unending. (De Certeau, 2000, p. 227)

There was a sudden upsurge in cases of demoniacal possession in France and other parts of Europe at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries. Studies such as Sarah Ferber’s *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France* (2004) or Stuart Clark’s *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (1997) provide extensive historical coverage as well as suggesting historical reasons for these phenomena. The most well known of these cases is the apparent possession during the 1630s in the small town of Loudun of a convent of Ursuline nuns by demons embodied in the Jesuit priest Urbain Grandier. The case is famously presented at length by Aldous Huxley in his 1952 *The Devils of Loudun* and finds its most sophisticated documentation and analysis in Michel de Certeau’s *The Possession at Loudun* (2000), first published in French in 1970. Huxley is perhaps the first to explicitly read the possession of the nuns as an expression of a repression, both political and personal. He sees that it is in the hysteria of the exorcism itself - as well in the hysteria of the possessed - that repression expresses itself. He writes:

The devils derived their strength from the very violence of the campaign which was waged against them. Strength in the nuns, and strength in the exorcists. Under the influence of an organized obsession with evil, the normal latent tendencies (tendencies to licence and blasphemy, to which, by induction, a strict religious discipline always give rise) came rushing to the surface. (Huxley, 2005, p. 326)

There is a fairly large body of contemporary writing on the Loudun possessions and this primary material is most clearly catalogued and presented by De Certeau. However more primary material is increasingly becoming available as archive texts are digitised. For instance, the 1887 English translation of an important account first published in French between 1634 and 1636 by a Monsieur des Niau, *The History of the Devils of Loudun: The Alleged Possession of the Ursuline Nuns and the Trial and Execution of Urbain Grandier*, is now freely available online thanks to the Open Knowledge Commons and Harvard Medical School. What is remarkable about this text is corroboration that both Ken Russell's *The Devils* and Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* are extraordinarily accurate in presenting the intricacies of the historical context as well as the personal detail of the individuals themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, neither film takes too many liberties with the known record. Although, as we shall see, the ending of Kawalerowicz's film is extremely fanciful.

Much of the commentary on Loudun focusses on the figure of politically controversial and outrageously libidinous Urbain Grandier - in Des Niau's account he is presented as an annoying pettifogger - however Kawalerowicz focusses on the exorcist who comes to the convent after Grandier's execution, Jean-Joseph Surin (in the film and novella he is referred to as Suryn and I will keep this spelling to refer to the fictional character in *Mother Joan*). Surin was an intellectual and, by all accounts, a devout believer bordering on being a mystic. It is useful to provide here a summary of the events at Loudun in order to orient ourselves in this turbulent arena:

1622: Jeanne joins the Poitiers Ursulines

1627: She moves to Loudun convent

1632: (6 Sep) The Plague (3700 dead of Loudun's 14000 - 26%)

1632 (21 Sep): Phantoms seen at the convent

1632: (7 Oct) Urbain Grandier named as the demon possessor

1632 (12 Oct): Jean de Laubardemont is sent by Cardinal Richelieu to oversee events. Pierre Barré, the exorcist, arrives

1634: (18 Aug) Grandier sentenced to death and executed.

1634 (Dec): Father Jean-Joseph Surin arrives

1636: Surin withdrawn from Loudun

1637 (7 Feb): Jeanne spontaneously recovers

1638: Triumphant tour of France

1665: Jeanne dies in Loudun; Surin dies in Bordeaux

While Ken Russell's film follows the events from 1632 to 1634, *Mother Joan* takes the following two years as its focus. One concentrates on Grandier and the other on Surin, but at the centre of both is Jeanne des Anges.

A number of fictional texts have used the historical events at Loudun as their basis. Kawalerowicz's film itself is based on a novella of the same name by the Polish author Jarosław Iwaskiewicz who wrote the story in 1943 during the German occupation of Poland and was subsequently published in his short story collection *New Love and Other Stories* in 1946. Iwaskiewicz's story is generally read as an allegory of struggle against fascism. Of course, Aldous Huxley's book on the events is extremely influential, although it is unclear whether Kawalerowicz himself made use of it. Huxley's text was explicitly adapted in John Whiting's play *The Devils* which was first performed in London in 1961. This play also formed the basis for Krzysztof Penderecki's opera *Die Teufel von Loudun* (*The Devils of Loudun*), the first 1969 performance of which, preceded Ken Russell's Whiting and Huxley infamous film adaptation *The Devils* (1971). Clearly each of these iterations reflect their own time of production as De Certeau eloquently points out:

The "sorcerer" of yore is metamorphosed into a victim of Catholicism, a "precursor of free thinking," a prophet of the scientific spirit, or a herald of the gospel of progress. His "adversaries" are promoted to similar but opposite destinies: Jeanne des Anges reappears as a martyr of persecuted Christianity; Surin, as a witness to a universal "magnetism" or to the "primordial fact"; the exorcists or Laubardemont as zealous servants of a "social" or political "order." ... There is a history of the history of Loudun. (De Certeau, 2000, p. 7)

For De Certeau, the events at Loudun present an exemplary case where interior worlds clash with exterior world views. He is attuned to the ways in which the repressions within the individual can only speak through the pageantry of possession. He calls this a body language: “From the outset the demon expresses himself in another language, which in Loudun becomes much more essential: a body language. Grimaces, contortions, rolling of the eyes, and so forth, little by little constitute the devil’s lexicon” (De Certeau, 2000, p. 44). It is this expression of what we may call dissent against political and sexual repression that becomes the central image for the various versions of the story.

What particularly marks the process of exorcism is its theatrical nature and Surin writes in his 1663 *La Science expérimentale des choses de l'autre vie acquise en la possession des Ursulines de Loudun* that it was a “theater to which all sorts of people came running” (in De Certeau, 2000, p. 199). Perhaps not surprisingly even contemporary accounts concentrate on the spectacle of the exorcism of young women. Thomas Kilgrew (1612-83) writes from Loudun:

Arriving to be exorcised, these girls are put on a bench, their heads laid on a pillow, their hands in handcuffs that are easily broken with the slightest effort and tied onto the benches with two straps, across the legs and the stomach. At first all this gives the impression of chaining up lions. But as soon as the demon appears, the girls are untied and left in complete freedom, so that they are bound as girls and set free as demons. (in De Certeau, 2000, p. 87)

The spectacle of the exorcism allies it very much with the folk carnival as described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) which he calls the “people’s second life” but whereas the true carnivalesque is based on laughter and parodies the piety and hypocrisy of the church (Ken Russell’s film perhaps comes closest to capturing an anarchic freedom in the proceedings), there was also, Bakhtin says, an “official feast” which:

asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was

betrayed and distorted. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9)

It is just such seriousness that we see in *Mother Joan of the Angels* and here perhaps it is worth examining Kawalerowicz's presentation of the exorcism in some detail since it is so very different from the equivalent scenes in either *The Devils* or its American counterpart *The Exorcist*. In both of these later films, the exorcism is presented as terrifying spectacle filled with libidinous energy and, especially in the case of Ken Russell, a sexualised hysteria which recalls very clearly the theatre of hysteria in Charcot's pre-psychoanalytic treatments (see Georges Didi-Huberman's idiosyncratic history *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (2003)). Kawalerowicz however presents the exorcism in a surprisingly restrained manner.

The extended and virtually silent sequence takes place almost exactly halfway through the film, after we have been introduced to all the major characters in the convent and in the inn. A static shot from the altar shows the dark entrance way into the church through which the nuns enter in single file with Joan at their head: their white habits in stark contrast to the darkness around them. They fan out into an almost military formation and a reverse shot shows four motionless priest exorcists and we realise that we have been watching the nuns' entrance through their eyes. One of the younger nuns begins to twirl in a dervish-like manner until another gently stops and calms her. All the nuns are expressionless. We cut to the audience of villagers including the inhabitants of the inn and whereas Russell presents the onlookers as a spectacle-craving rabble, in *Mother Joan* the spectators are quietly horrified and a mother leads her children away as one begins to cry. Mother Joan has now a half-smile on her lips and Lucyna Winnicka's extraordinary and impudent beauty somehow becomes an uncanny sign of devilishness. As the priests begin to sing, Joan's expression hardens. The priests spatter the assembled nuns with holy water and all scurry away to hide except for Mother Joan and Sister Małgorzata who crosses herself calmly, turns and smiles brazenly at the squire and sits on the pew in front of him with her hands pressed together as if in prayer.

We now see Joan from behind as the priests begin the Latin exorcism. A priest puts his stole around her shoulders and smiling she shrugs it off turning to move away, but is stopped by a sudden shout of "Satan!" She raises her arms upwards with her fingers splayed and trembling. Suryn looks on in amazement as Joan bends over backwards until her palms touch the ground behind her. We then cut to a close up of her upside down face as the voice of the

demon begins to speak: “I won’t. I don’t want to. I don’t want to.” Her face is covered with sweat and as the names of the demons are read out, her expression becomes one of ecstasy. She quickly rights herself and addresses the priest in a childishly confident voice, that of the demon Dog’s Tail (although the Polish term would seem to translate more accurately as Spark or Firebrand). She then lists the places of her body that house her various demons (De Certeau lists nine such demons) with Asmodeus’s sexual position indicated by the nuns’ faux-embarrassed laughter. “Satan, I order you to leave her!” commands another priest and Joan indicates that the demon has left her. Pleased, the priests turn to face the altar and take up their song again.

Kawalerowicz’s camera floats towards their backs and comes closer and closer until we hear Joan’s demon voice again: “I am Satan!” Confronted with a wooden cross and the demand to show obeisance to God, she backs away and adopts a pose of servile worship. The other nuns watch her balletic performance and begin to copy her movements. The scene shows just how copied behaviour might appear to be spontaneously simultaneous. They bow and scrape until Joan falls to the ground and almost effortlessly, as if truly controlled by a superior force, rolls towards the exit of the church until she is restrained and returned by a couple of vergers. Growling, she is tied up with ropes on a bench and all four priests hold their crosses to her. She glances at Suryn and curses God and breaks her bonds. The nuns dance briefly until a quiet comes over them and Joan rushes towards Suryn and begs mercy from Mary. Suryn is visibly overwhelmed by the transformation as he too turns toward the altar. The nuns prostrate themselves on the floor - the image has their white cross-shapes facing correctly - and the long shot of their abasement as the singing continues is one of the most powerful in the film. It is perhaps not surprising that the next shot we see is of Suryn reaching for his whip and flagellating himself on his bare back. The emotion of the exorcism is explicitly sublimated into the sensuousness of pain.

The very first image in the film is of a priest, Suryn as we learn later, lying prostrate on the ground. The camera is positioned directly over the figure with his head at the bottom of the screen. Thus we are presented with a living inverted cross and this recalls both the crucifixion of Peter, who insisted on being crucified upside down so as not to imitate and therefore invite comparison to the crucified Christ, but is also a well known sign of satan. This double image sets up very clearly the story that will follow: there will be a martyrdom of extraordinary self-sacrifice and humility but this martyr will also be tainted by delusion and evil.

In comparison to Ken Russell's version, Kawalerowicz's film empties out most of the political context of the film, placing the action in an isolated convent with only a small inn at its foot. These two places are ironically contrasted, as Marek Haltof explains:

The bright convent on the hill and the dark inn at the bottom play a crucial role in the film's concept. The convent is inhabited by the white figures of the nuns, whirling during the devil's activities, their robes flowing in a carefully choreographed manner. The whiteness of the nuns' robes is juxtaposed with the dark robes of the exorcists and the black or shadowy background. (Haltof, 2002, p. 100)

Thus the struggle is literally much more stark in Kawalerowicz's film, but it is not so much the battle between good and evil that is of central importance (as it is clearly in Russell's film) but rather the difficulty of easily distinguishing between what might or might not be good or evil. This is the central problem that is explored when Father Suryn visits a rabbi (played by the same actor, Mieczysław Voit) in which he asks advice on this very question: how can one tell right from wrong, devils from angels? Suryn absolutely believes in the reality of the possession and De Certeau writes: "Not for a second does he doubt the reality of the possession. How could he, without betraying the cause he received the mission of defending?" (2000, p. 203) but the Rabbi humanises this question. He says:

Maybe the trouble is not demons but the absence of angels. Mother Joan's angel has gone and she is left only with herself. Maybe it's only human nature.

He also asks the heretical question: "What if Satan created the world? [...] For if the Lord created it why is there so much evil in it?" but Suryn cannot countenance this idea and the Rabbi continues to complicate matters by implying that the demons are a human rather than divine product: "You want to know all about demons? Let them enter your soul" to which Suryn answers, "My demons are my business and my soul is my own." This exchange is particularly ironic since at the end of the film Suryn understands the Rabbi's words literally and imagines that he is able to free Mother Joan by taking her demons into himself. This at least would appear to concur with the surviving record. The historical Surin went on to write a number of texts on his experiences at Loudun and in his 1636 *Le Triomphe de l'amour divin sur les puissances de l'enfer en la possession de la Mère supérieure des Ursulines de Loudun*,

he describes this decision, writing in the third person:

He implored God with tears to give him that girl so that he might make her into a perfect religious, and was moved to pray for that with such ardor that one day he could not keep from offering himself to the Divine Majesty to be burdened with the evil of that poor girl and to participate in all her temptations and suffering, to the point of asking to be possessed by the devil, provided He agreed to give him the freedom to enter into her and devote himself to her soul. From that moment on, there was born in the heart of that father a paternal love for that afflicted soul, which made him desire to suffer a strange thing for her, and he considered that his greatest happiness would be to imitate Jesus Christ, who, to withdraw souls from Satan's captivity, had suffered death, having taken on their infirmities upon himself. (in De Certeau, 2000, pp. 202-203)

In the film, once the demon has left Joan for him, Suryn murders two livery lads asleep in the inn's stable. The logic here is that through committing an act of extreme evil Suryn will ensure that he becomes absolutely evil and unforgivable. This state of disgrace will trap the demons inside him and finally bring peace to the convent. Clearly Suryn models himself in this act on Christ's redemption of humanity's sin through crucifixion. However, Suryn's act is misguided and even self-aggrandising. Of course the real Surin did not kill anyone and lived on until 1665.

In *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), which some claim was inspired by Surin's story, Father Damian Karras's (Jason Miller) final self-destruction similarly echoes the Christ figure's acceptance of humanity's sins upon himself and with his own death ensures the life of the possessed. And so *The Exorcist* allows the audience to experience all the visceral, forbidden and horrifying pleasures of sin through the image of the possessed and its excesses but in the end the film offers as absolution absolute proof of the existence of god: for if the devil is proved to exist (and this is made irrefutable by the possession of Karras himself) then it must follow that God exists as well. This, then, conveniently saves Karras from the sin of doubt ("I think I have lost my faith") while at the same time justifying the obscene imagery of the film to the audience in the sense that it represents a certain, irrefutable and negative proof of the existence of God.

Aldous Huxley points to a fundamental flaw in this argument (a flaw that most films concerning the devil have to ignore in order to posit the devil as viable character in the first place): Christianity should not be equated with Manichaeism, i.e. the belief in absolute polar opposites as equivalents. Huxley writes:

For Christians, evil is not a substance, not a real and elementary principle. It is merely a privation of good, a diminution of being in creatures who derive their essential being from God. Satan is not...an eternal principle of Darkness over against the divine principle of Light. Satan is merely the most considerable among a vast number of individual angels who, at a given moment of time, chose to separate themselves from God. It is only by courtesy that we call him the Evil One....Theologians, I repeat, have carefully guarded against Manichaean dualism; but, at all times, all too many Christians have behaved as though the devil were a First Principle, on the same footing as God. (Huxley, 2005, pp. 200-201)

The Logic of Possession: *The Devils* and *The Exorcist*

Possession is more often secular than supernatural. Men are possessed by their thoughts of a hated person, a hated class, race or nation. At the present time the destinies of the world are in the hands of self-made demoniacs – of men who are possessed by, and who manifest, the evil they have chosen to see in others. (Huxley, 2005, p. 275)

Central to the films is the image of possession. In *The Devils*, the hump-backed Mother Superior, Sister Jeanne of the Angels (Vanessay Redgrave), has a strong sexual fascination with Grandier (Oliver Reed) and her fantasies confuse his body with that of Christ's on the Cross. She awakes from a prayer-induced reverie (in which her initial ecstatic pleasure turns into anguished torment as the gathered crowd mock her physical deformity) to find that she has driven her crucifix deep into the palm of her hand. This use of the crucifix as a weapon of mutilation is one that will recur more spectacularly in *The Exorcist* but such crass histrionics do not feature in Kawalerowicz's film.

Russell plays on the barbaric and sexual nature of the exorcism and on the exorcists' own

enjoyment of the carnival of the ritual. At the end of the film when Grandier is burnt at the stake, a travelling theatre company sets up a burlesque play based on the supposed possession stressing the sexual nature of the preceding religious activities. What is also interesting is the oscillation between reality and pretence which, in many ways, is always the fundamental problem in ideas around religious possession: how can one tell the difference between madness or deceit and “real” possession? It is this confusion of interior and exterior that is the major theme of Russell’s film and one that appears in *Mother Joan* as well. There is an iconographic stress on masks and, by implication, on subterfuge, and it is no surprise that when Grandier finally accepts the truth of his love for his consort, Madeleine (and conveniently for God), that he is completely shaved, including his eyebrows, and thus without a mask. The logic of this continues when his body is destroyed by fire and scattered to the winds. Laubardemont leaves Jeanne with a piece of Grandier’s blackened thigh-bone as a “souvenir” – this is an ironic joke on the integrity of Grandier’s interiority.

Both priests in *The Devils* and *The Exorcist*, Urbain Grandier and Damian Karras, find themselves in conflict with the Church. In his position as psychiatrist to doubting priests, Karras is in the ironic position of losing that faith himself, while Grandier is seen as opposing the hypocritical, political Church of Richelieu. Grandier’s own faith in *The Devils* is a romantic mixture of sexual paganism and belief in the simple message of love in the New Testament. His pure beliefs contradict the superstitions of the established church, a church which easily allies itself with alchemy and magic. A contrast between the bureaucracy of the Church as a *system* and Grandier’s own idiosyncratic, populist beliefs is carefully developed throughout *The Devils*. Grandier here again echoes the Christ figure, while the legal and ecclesiastical forces of Richelieu and Louis XIII are allied with the Pharisees. Thus, whereas Karras doubts the very existence of God in the modern world, Grandier sees the contemporary church as a betrayer of its own teaching. While Grandier may doubt the Church, Karras doubts God.

And so for Karras the first problem when asked to perform an exorcism is one of proof – and most of his interactions with the demon are based around his doubt and search for positive proof of the existence of the demon (which, as I have said, would then also be proof for his own faltering faith). Aldous Huxley outlines the Church’s tests:

How is true possession to be distinguished from fraud or the symptoms of disease?

The Church prescribes four tests – the language test, the test of preternatural physical strength, the test of levitation and the test of clairvoyance and prevision. If a person can on occasion understand, or better still, speak a language of which, in his normal state, he is completely ignorant; if he can manifest the physical miracle of levitation or perform unaccountable feats of strength; and if he can correctly predict the future or describe events taking place at a distance – then that person may be presumed to be possessed by devils. (Alternatively, he may be presumed to be the recipient of extraordinary graces; for in many instances divine and infernal miracles are, most unhappily, identical). (Huxley, 2005, p. 203)

Finally Karras thinks that he has enough proof and goes to request official sanction for the exorcism. In contrast to Karras, Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) is absolutely uninterested in any proof. “I think I should tell you the facts of the case”, says Karras. “Why?” answers Merrin. To Karras’ continued explanation that Regan has exhibited at least three distinct personalities (thus still vaguely clinging to a materialist explanation) Merrin answers curtly, “There is only one!”. True faith, it would seem, requires no proof.

It is also odd that *The Devils* itself becomes caught up in the discourse of possession. Billy Graham (the evangelical Christian and sometime sexual sinner) claims that the very celluloid of the film is imbued with the devil and some have claimed to have been possessed by the demon while watching the film. Kermode writes: “In October 1974, *The Exorcist*, was cited as responsible for the murder of a nine-year-old girl by a teenager who told York Town Court: “It was not really me that did it. There was something inside me. It is ever since I saw that film *The Exorcist*. I felt something take possession of me. It has been in me ever since” (Kermode, 1997, p. 85).

Here, then, is the very problem of possession: it is impossible to tell one way or the other because possession implies the use of the existing body and thus denies the existence of any physical evidence of the demon. But this difficulty is exacerbated if we take for granted the existence of the devil because the devil is then the great liar and can never be trusted (a fact about which Merrin himself warns Karras). If the devil were to speak and say “I am the devil” it would be equivalent to saying, seriously, “I am lying” – how can the listener know whether that statement is true or false? If it is true then it is false; if false, then true. Possession, then, I would argue, presents the absolute paradigm for Todorov’s conception of

the Fantastic.

Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings – with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. (Todorov, 1975, p. 25)

In encountering the possessed, we can never be sure of the truth of that possession. Not because there might be a “true possession” (as opposed to a “false” one) but rather that possession itself functions in the space between true and false, between the uncanny and the marvellous: in the space of the fantastic. And so the reader or the viewer becomes the priest at the exorcism of the text. Is the text true or is it false? What proofs might offer themselves will always be tinged with a doubt that could only ever be confirmed by the direct intervention of God himself – and, even then, how would we know that that was God and not the Devil?

Space is the Place

Mother Joan has three main spaces of action. The first is the village inn where we first encounter Suryn. The second is the bleak white convent itself up on a hill, while the third is the interstitial wasteland between the two which is also the place of Gandier’s (called Graniec in the film) blackened execution pyre. It is at this pyre that Suryn prays unsuccessfully for help towards the end of the film. Within the convent itself there are a number of distinct areas including the church, which we have already discussed as the place of the exorcisms, the corridors through which the nuns move (we never see where they live or sleep), the courtyard between the gate and the convent which is crossed a number of times throughout the film but is also the place where we first see the nuns all twirling in controlled ecstasy - an image that seems to contain all their hopes and futilities.

Mother Joan concentrates on the desire between Suryn and Joan, thus making the tale much more personal than Russell and Huxley’s versions. While Russell’s film may be characterised by wild abandon (both in style and approach to the subject matter), Kawalerowicz’s film is one of circumspection and restraint and these are the characteristic traits of both Suryn and the possessed nuns. At one point, Suryn and Joan sublimate their sexual desire into an episode of simultaneous self-flagellation and Kawalerowicz is careful to complicate the

possibility that their desire might easily be satisfied in more conventional manner by contrasting their story with that of the liminal Sister Małgorzata who enters into a carnal relationship with a visiting squire, only to be cruelly abandoned by him after physical consummation.

The final space of the convent is the attic room where Suryn and Joan confront each other and where they touch and find love. While at first they are separated by pristine white laundry, later this is replaced by a wooden lattice which resembles both a prison door and recalls the wooden cross. It is through this barrier that Suryn and Joan connect and communicate. For Suryn and Joan it is the fragility of simple love that seems to be unsustainable but it is in the image of their hands touching through these bars that Kawalerowicz indicates a hope for a future without religion but with love.

In conclusion it is perhaps worthwhile to quote at length from Des Niau's supposed eyewitness account of the final exorcism that frees Mother Joan from her discontents:

At the beginning of 1636, on Twelfth Night, Father Surin resolved to compel the last demon that remained in the Mother Superior to adore Jesus Christ. He had the lady tied to a bench. The exorcisms drove the demon into a fury and instead of obeying, he vomited a multitude of maledictions and blasphemies against the three persons of the Holy Trinity, against Jesus Christ, and against his Holy Mother, so execrable that one would be horrified to read them. The father knew that he was about to come out, and had the lady unbound. After tremblings, contortions, and horrible howlings, Father Surin pressed him more and more with the Holy Sacrament in his hand, and ordered him in Latin to write the name of Mary on the lady's hand. Raising her left arm into the air, the fiend redoubled his cries and howls, and in a last convulsion issued from the lady, leaving on her hand the holy name Maria, in letters so perfectly formed that no human hand could imitate them. The lady felt herself free and full of joy; and a *Te Deum* was sung in honour of the event. (Niau, 1887, pp. 25-26 Vol. 3)

Mother Joan famously then goes off on an exhibition tour of France in order to display this devilish signature, although it is claimed that one particularly visitor dared to touch the letter M on Joan's hand which apparently easily rubbed away...

Whatever seems to have happened in Loudun is seems clear that today the one explanation that cannot be countenanced is that the nuns in Ursuline convent were possessed be a demonic force. The fantasy of religion is one that Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* both respects but finds impossible. In his later films, Kawalerowicz appears to want to return to a more religious understanding of the world, but it is in *Mother Joan* that he truly manages to criticise politics, repression and religion without betraying the humanity of those touched in so spectacular a way.

The treasury ceased to pay the salary of the surviving exorcists, who were recalled to their various houses. Left to themselves such devils as remained soon took their leave. After six years of incessant struggle, the Church Militant gave up the fight. Its enemies promptly disappeared. The long orgy was at an end. If there had been no exorcists, it would never have begun. (Huxley, 2005, p. 299)

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